

# THE PLANNING POST

City of Columbus - Bartholomew County Planning Department

Second Quarter 2025

## Featured Topic



### *Growing pains: The next generation of farmers struggles to fit on preserved farmland*

As the next generation of farmers look to take over preserved farmland, many are finding it increasingly difficult to make use of it. Conservation easements, which protect land from development, often come with size and subdivision restrictions that make ownership or practical use challenging for younger, smaller scale farmers. While these easements were designed to preserve agricultural land, they sometimes clash with modern farming needs, leaving many acres underutilized. As farmland continues to change hands, balancing preservation with flexibility will be crucial to supporting sustainable agriculture.

## *Bartholomew County Plan Commission Noteworthy Decisions*

### **BMP-2024-015: Florence Critney Minor Subdivision Replat—Approved**

A request by Bradley & Laura Schmitt to create one new lot out of an existing 17.34 acre lot, for a total of 6 lots over 82.99 acres. The property is located on 450 North, approximately 0.26 miles east of the intersection of 400 West, in German Township.

## *City of Columbus Plan Commission Noteworthy Decisions*

### **PUDF-2025-001: Westwood Market –Approved**

A request by Westwood Petroleum, LLC for Final PUD Plan approval for a gas station/convenience store to be located on Lot 6 of the Westwood Planned Unit Development. The property is located at the southeast corner of Westwood Boulevard and Pine Ridge Drive, in the City of Columbus.

### **DP-2025-002: Columbus Municipal Airport (Air Traffic Control Tower) - Approved**

A request by the Columbus Municipal Airport for site development plan major modification approval for a new air traffic control tower including modifications from Zoning Ordinance Section 3.22(C) to allow the structure to be 128 feet, 10 inches in height, 83 feet, 10 inches taller than the 45 foot maximum height and from Zoning Ordinance Section 9.3(D)(2) to allow a fence in a front yard to be 6 feet in height, 2.5 feet taller than the 3.5 foot maximum height. The property is located at the northeast corner of the intersection of Arnold Street and Ray Boll Boulevard, in the City of Columbus.

### **ANX-2025-001 & RZ-2025-001: Sandeep Kumar Bhowra – Favorable Recommendation**

A request by Sandeep Kumar Bhowra to annex 6.91 acres into the Columbus Corporate Limits and change it's zoning from AP (Agriculture: Preferred) to CR (Commercial: Regional). The property is located at the southwest corner of the 450 South/State Road 58 and I-65 interchange, in Wayne Township.



Westwood Market



Air Traffic Control Tower

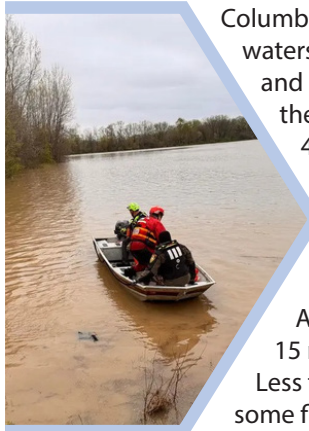


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## Floodplain Management Report

Written By: Chelsea Cottingham



Columbus Indiana sits in the lowlands of a very large 2,000 plus square mile watershed (Figure 1). There are 5 major tributaries that drain through the city and each of the tributaries have varied flow and capacity features that make them unique. According to the National Weather Service, approximately 4.4 inches of rain fell in the local watershed area from April 5 - 9, 2025.

Such a large amount of rain in a relatively short time frame, caused widespread flooding.

During the flood event several major roads were closed including SR 46, Indianapolis Road, Marr Road, and SR 11. All routes were reopened by April 10 at 11:30am. Less than 15 residential homes near the lagoons experienced flooding. Less than 8 businesses along Indianapolis Road and SR 11 had some flooding damage. During the event, emergency services reported over 15 water rescues for approximately 31 citizens.

The Planning Department is responsible for maintaining the emergency response and planning documents that help the Emergency Management Office and first responders better prepare for and respond to flood events. While April's flooding may seem severe, statistically, modeling would tell us to expect to see flooding events that look similar every decade. Flooding events are categorized by severity by how often we would expect to see that level of inundation (10 years, 50 years, 100 years, and 500 years). The table below details the height of each stream's crest and the type of flood event on each of the streams.

Following the flood, the Floodplain Manager, working with other agencies like Bartholomew County Emergency Management, Columbus Fire, and Columbus Police, gathered event documentation from sources like USGS gages, drone footage, and local observations, etc. and worked to ground-truth the model predictions located in the Flood Response and Evacuation Plan (FREP) with the actual flooding experienced. Refining the current data and strategies helps advise and plan for future development and future flooding events.



Figure 1: Watershed areas that drain through Columbus, IN

Stream Name	Crest Height (ft.)	Crest Date	Crest Time	Record Crest Information	Type of Flood Event
Driftwood River	16.57	4/6/2025	4:30 PM	20.30 feet on March 28, 1913	10 year event
Flatrock River	16.22	4/6/2025	9:15 AM	19.94 feet on June 7, 2008	10 year event
East Fork White River	17.09	4/6/2025	5:15 PM	18.61 feet on June 8, 2008	10 year event
Haw Creek	14.07	4/5/2025	11:45 AM	17.0 feet on June 7, 2008	50 year event
Clifty Creek	19.56	4/6/2025	1:15 AM	22.17 feet on June 7, 2008	10 year event

Table 1: Height of stream crest for each of the 5 major streams that drain through Columbus as well as historical crest info and type of event.

## Long Range Planning Report

Written By: Jessie Boshell

The Planning Department staff has continued working on potential updates and concepts for the zoning ordinance that reflect the results of the Columbus Housing Study. Staff presented these items for discussion both at the January 8 and March 12 Plan Commission meetings. Staff has taken the feedback provided and narrowed the scope of the items presented, as well as begun to work on drafting standards related to new proposed housing types. Discussion of these housing-related zoning ordinance revisions will most likely continue through 2025, concluding with public input and the eventual adoption process.





## Long Range Planning Report Cont.

Written By: Jessie Boshell

Planning Department staff members Jeff Bergman, Melissa Begley, Jessie Boshell, and Andres Nieto attended the American Planning Association National Conference in Denver, Colorado in late March/early April. At that conference, staff attended many housing-related sessions that solidified the local zoning ordinance revision work that is currently underway, and gained insight into what other cities have done to address housing availability and affordability. As part of the conference, staff attended a mobile workshop on micro housing communities, and this experience has provided further clarity and insight into regulatory options for best enabling cottage court developments, shared housing developments, and other housing types.



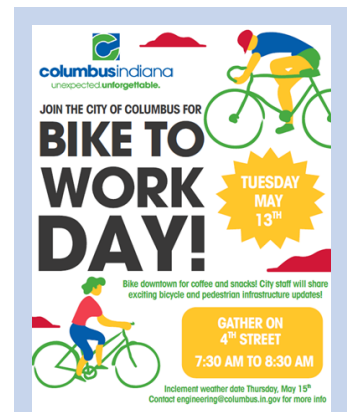
**Left image** is an example of a micro housing community in Denver, where a local high school that participates in trade related education constructed the units. Units are 90 Square feet, and at this particular community there were 48 units.



**Right image** shows the shed type buildings that have been utilized for micro-housing. These units are around 70 square feet and feature a bed, closet, and desk space for tenants with heating and cooling.

The Planning Department staff has also been working with the City's Engineering Department on several bicycle and pedestrian related projects. One of those being the repaving of the People Trail from the 3rd Street Bridge to Walgreens along Jonathon Moore Pike. Staff has worked with Engineering to determine proper wayfinding locations and pavement markings. This project is going to serve as a pilot project to examine the installation of pavement markings and wayfinding signage prior to the larger People Trail wayfinding installation project also being developed and mentioned in the February Planning Post.

Finally, Planning Department staff, again in partnership with the City's Engineering Department submitted a grant application to the Indiana Department of Health in February for a "tactical urbanism" project. Tactical urbanism projects are an approach to neighborhood building that uses short-term, low cost, and scalable interventions to catalyze long-term change, typically utilized to experiment with and gather input on potential street design changes. The proposed project location is at the intersection of Home Avenue and 27th Street where four schools ranging from elementary to high school are located. This project would incorporate temporary painted curb extensions and other measures to help with pedestrian safety issues at this location. The intent would be to analyze project results to formulate a more permanent solution that would be a part of a larger 27th Street improvement project. Our Columbus project team was interviewed by the Indiana Department of Health in early April, and subsequently was awarded a \$7,000 grant to be used for our tactical urbanism installation.



In other bicycle and pedestrian news, the month of May is National Bike Month, which is promoted by the League of American Bicyclists and recognized across the country. To recognize National Bike Month in Columbus, the Planning Department, together with the Engineering Department, Parks Department, and Columbus Regional Health's Healthy Communities Initiative, will coordinate a Bike to Work Day on Tuesday, May 13th, with the rain date to be Thursday, May 15th.



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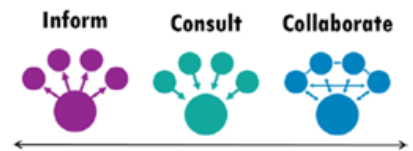
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## Transportation Planning Report

Written By: Ashley Beckort

The Planning Department staff has been working on draft updates to the Columbus Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO) Operational Bylaws and Public Participation Plan. These changes will be reviewed at the May 12th CAMPO Policy Board Meeting. CAMPO is the local organization charged with receiving and distributing federal transportation planning and improvement funds.

CAMPO was established in 2003, with the Policy Board bylaws created soon after and not reviewed or revised since that initial adoption. The ongoing update evaluated the bylaws for compliance with current Federal



and State standards, as well as updated them to address the since time-tested and practically applied operation of the Policy Board. This update also included managing membership and streamlining processes.

CAMPO is required to maintain a Public Participation Plan (PPP) that is adopted by the Policy Board and coordinated with the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) participation process, and defines public participation standards for all CAMPO activities. Public participation takes place in a variety of ways, including social media, public meetings, open houses, and stakeholder workshops. The PPP is updated when warranted by changes in federal laws, or if necessary to ensure a full and open participation process. The original PPP was adopted in 2007, and was updated in 2018 based on changes to federal law. In 2020, the PPP was amended to allow remote participation by the public during periods when in-person participation may not be feasible, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new PPP lists out the required plans and reports and records any federal or state laws associated with them. The provided table lists CAMPO's required plans and reports, who typically creates the document, and who provides final approval of the document. The table also includes CAMPO's policy on the level of public involvement. Some documents are made available to view (inform), others are shared for public comment prior to final approval (consult), and others are written with the input of stakeholders (collaborate). This PPP also includes graphics to explain how the reports are interconnected.

<b>Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) Long Range Plan</b>	Timeframe: 20-year plan Updated: every 5 years Focus: big-picture, priority projects
<b>Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) Fiscal Plan</b>	Timeframe: 5-year plan Updated: every 2 years Focus: projects to be funded
<b>Annual List of Obligated Projects (ALOP) Annual Report</b>	Timeframe: past year Updated: yearly Focus: projects that received funding
<b>Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) Work Plan</b>	Timeframe: year ahead Updated: yearly Focus: operating budget and projects planned
<b>Annual Completion Report (ACR) Annual Report</b>	Timeframe: past year Updated: yearly Focus: funds used, projects completed, and any carrying-over

Required Plans and Reports	Typically Created By	Approved By	Public Involvement
Public Participation Plan (PPP) -Amendment	Staff Staff	Policy Board Policy Board	Consult (45 days) Consult (45 days)
Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) -Amendment	Staff/Consultant Staff	Policy Board Policy Board	Collaborate & Consult (30 days) Consult (30 days)
Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) -Amendment -Administrative Modification	Staff Staff Staff	Policy Board Policy Board Staff	Consult (30 days) Inform Inform
Annual List of Obligated Projects (ALOP)	Staff	Staff	Inform
Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) -Amendment -Administrative Modification	Staff Staff Staff	Policy Board Policy Board Staff	Inform Inform Inform
Annual Completion Report (ACR)	Staff	Staff	Inform
Coordinated Public Transit Human Services Transportation Plan	Staff/Consultant	Policy Board	Collaborate
Title VI Implementation Plan	Staff	Policy Board	Inform



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## Transportation Planning Report Cont.

Written By: Ashley Beckort

The Planning Department staff has also been working on the draft CAMPO Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for State Fiscal Years 2026-2030. The TIP is a 5-year plan that includes a compilation of construction projects that use federal funding. The TIP list includes both local projects sponsored by the City of Columbus and Bartholomew County, as well as, Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) projects within the CAMPO Planning Area (Bartholomew County). The draft TIP was open for public comment throughout April with an public open house held on April 8th. The final draft will be considered at the May 12th CAMPO Policy Board Meeting. The final document is then sent to INDOT, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for processing and becomes effective at the beginning of the state fiscal year, July 1st.

CAMPO continually coordinates with INDOT on their construction projects. INDOT has shared details of a road closure along State Road 58 for a bridge replacement project over the the East Fork White Creek between 450 South and 525 South. This project is listed in the current 2025-2028 TIP. INDOT's report indicates that the bridge will be closed starting May 5th and reopen in September, weather permitting. For more information on the road closure, contact INDOT [www.in.gov/indot/](http://www.in.gov/indot/).



## Development Review Report

Written By: Melissa Begley

You may notice increased construction activity at the corner of 22nd Street and Central Avenue. The former Vernco building is in the process of being converted to commercial tenant spaces. The conversion includes removing a portion of the existing building along Central Avenue and creating new entrances to tenant spaces with a new façade treatment. This project has involved several regulatory steps, beginning in 2017 when the property was rezoned from RM (Residential: Multi-Family) to CC (Commercial: Community).

In 2019, the owner sought and received Conditional Use approval from the Board of Zoning Appeals to establish off-site parking on the west side of Cottage Avenue as well as Zoning Compliance Certificate approval to rebuild that parking lot.

In January of 2024, a Zoning Compliance Certificate was issued for the Barrera Soccer Club to occupy a space on the Cottage Avenue facing side of the building and in June of 2024 a Zoning Compliance Certificate was issued for Dancers Studio to also occupy a space on the Cottage Avenue facing side of the building.

Most recently, the owner sought and received a Zoning Compliance Certificate, on February 25, 2025, for the construction of a new parking lot on the east side of the building, along Central Avenue, with access off of 22nd and 23rd Streets.



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Roger Short sold his protected family farm in Port Townsend, Wash., to the area's port authority, which now leases parts of it to local farmers. Chona Kasinger for NBC News

#### ECONOMY

## Growing pains: The next generation of farmers struggles to fit on preserved farmland

Conservation easements have checked development from gobbling up agricultural tracts for decades, but growers increasingly chafe against the policies' size restrictions.

Feb. 16, 2025, 7:00 AM EST

**By Alexandra Byrne**

In 2023, Roger Short sold the farm that had been in his family for nearly eight decades to an unusual buyer: the nearby port authority.

He and his wife, Sandy, had raised their six children and 600 dairy cows on the 253-acre property in Port Townsend, Washington. When they sold the cows in 2003 to focus on producing beef and topsoil, he said he mourned the animals' loss for the next two years.

Short, 82, is first to admit the land is “a difficult place to farm.” As he grew older and lost his eyesight, he worried about finding a buyer for it. But he was resolved on one thing – that his farm should stay a farm. So in 2016, he secured what’s known as a conservation easement, a type of legal agreement that required his property, some of which floods or lacks irrigation, to remain a farm forever.

That posed some challenges, said Eron Berg, executive director of the Port of Port Townsend. If the easement “hadn’t been there, this farm could have been sold in six 40-acre parcels,” he said, and “younger, newer farmers might have been able to afford to do something.” Instead, the port bought the property for \$1.4 million so it could lease parts to local growers.

The predicament is mirrored across the country as the next generation of farmers confronts a growing inventory of protected farmland that doesn’t always suit their needs or budgets. That’s leaving many acres underutilized at a time when the U.S. is steadily losing farmland and [the agriculture industry keeps consolidating](#) into ever fewer, larger farms.



Martin Federickson leases 75 acres of the Short property to give his cattle more space to roam. He said buying the whole place was never financially viable for him. Chona Kasinger for NBC News

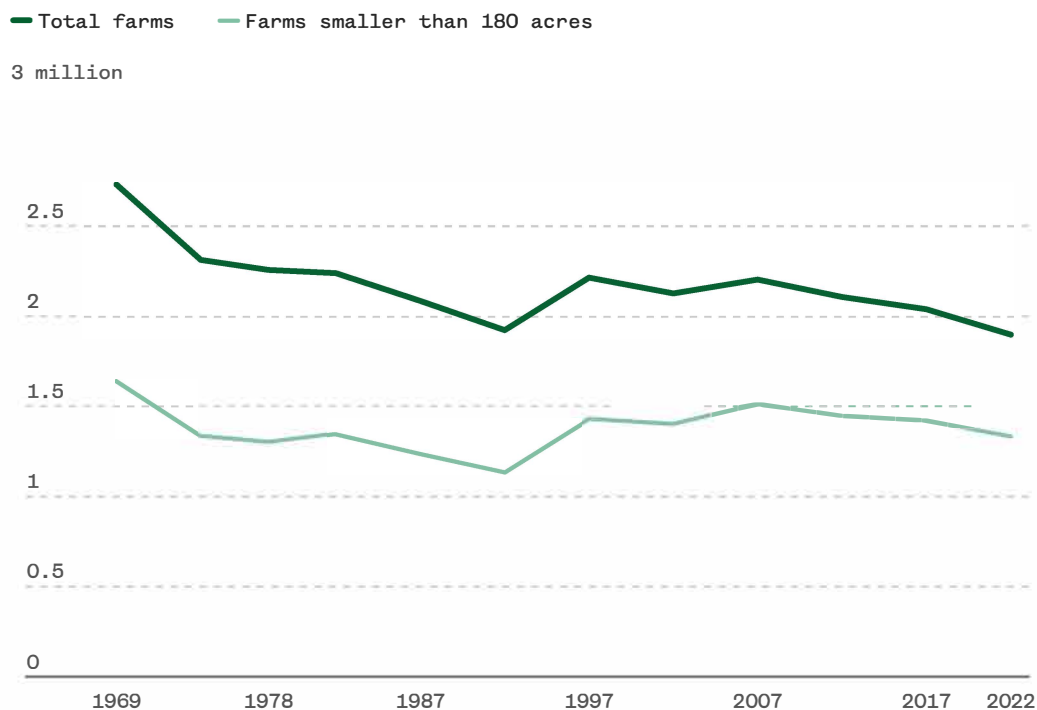


“Think about it as forcing people to use rotary phones,” Bruce Sherrick, director of the TIAA Center for Farmland Research at the University of Illinois, said of conservation easements. “They don’t fit through time very well.”

The nation’s [estimated 7.9 million preserved acres](#) are a tiny fraction of the [880 million acres of U.S. farmland](#), but they remain a valuable entry point for younger and small-scale growers. When a landowner places an easement on a farm, they sell their rights to develop it, ideally letting another farmer acquire it for less.

## Fewer farms

The total number of farms in the U.S. has declined by over 30% since 1969.



Source: USDA

Graphic: Alexandra Byrne and Jiachuan Wu / NBC News



This practice remains popular. The number of easements within state programs, which comprise nearly half the nation's protected acreage, [has grown by about 20%](#) over the last five years, according to the American Farmland Trust. Many older farmers, like Short, have embraced preservation partly to support their retirements. But there's often an emotional pull too.

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"We had one farmer that said, 'I've been working on this farm for over 30 years. The last thing I want is houses on it when I'm 6 feet under the ground,'" said Leigh Ann Hammerbacher, director of land protection and stewardship at the Triangle Land Conservancy in Durham, North Carolina.

Conservation easements belong to a patchwork of state and local policies, land trusts and landowner agreements dating to the environmental movement of the 1970s. The federal government has overseen a related grant program since 1996. But while these efforts have protected countless farms from development, they [haven't halted the decadeslong trend](#) favoring large, industrial producers that experts say are critical to stocking supermarkets with affordable groceries.



Roger Short and his wife, Sandy, still visit the farm where they raised their six children. He has relied on her assistance since losing his eyesight. Chona Kasinger for NBC News

“We romanticize the idea of small, individually held farms with three cows, a chicken and a tractor, but commercially meaningful farm scale – where you’re going to get efficient, cheap food – is a much larger scale than that,” Sherrick said. “It’s less and less likely that individuals can own the entire unit.”

Still, many small farmers say they aren’t interested in producing as much food as they can as cheaply as possible, or competing with juggernaut growers that do. And some find that easements make small-scale farming harder.

## **Conversations are starting to happen about how to actually keep [farmland] in production, as opposed to just keeping it undeveloped.**

JEFF BENTON, OWNER OF ORANGE CIRCLE FARM, BERWICK, MAINE

Jeff Benton uses only a fraction of his 20-acre Orange Circle Farm, whose previous owners placed the Berwick, Maine, property under an easement when they sold it to him in 2017. For Benton, crop diversity, sustainable practices and his organic certification matter more than expanding. Since 2011, the U.S. has [nearly doubled its tally of organic farms](#), which tend to be a third the size of their conventional row-crop counterparts.

Benton, 41, said his farm is one of two remaining on a road that once boasted seven, and he believes there’d be more if his land could be subdivided, which the easement forbids.

“If I am at capacity of how I want to function as a vegetable farm, it doesn’t make sense for me to scale up what I’m doing,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean that there aren’t other farms who would come here.”

Benton said he understands farmers who use easements to fend off developers. At less than an hour’s drive from Portland, Berwick has become popular among commuters from coastal Maine, an in-demand area [facing a housing crunch](#). But he sees that option as “responding to the problems of today with a solution that worked 60 years ago.”

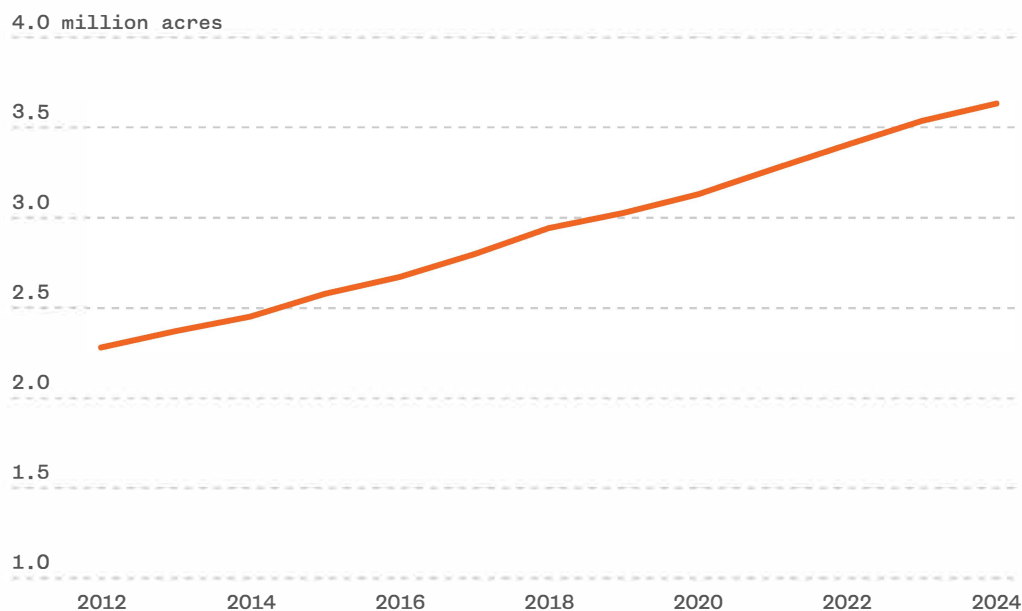
“Conversations are starting to happen about how to actually keep [farmland] in production, as opposed to just keeping it undeveloped,” he said.

Many easements remain with the farmers who obtained them – for now. In North Carolina, Hammerbacher said just 10 of the 180 easements her conservancy holds have been passed on or sold, but she’s bracing for that number to swell. [Up to a third of the nation’s farmland](#) is expected to change hands in the next two decades, according to the AFT. The share of farmers age 65 or older rose by 12% from 2017 to 2022, [U.S. Department of Agriculture data](#) shows.

“We’ve worked with the original landowners on crafting the easement to meet their needs,” Hammerbacher said. “The challenges come in working with the next generation.”

## Millions of acres preserved

The amount of preserved farmland within state programs in the U.S. has increased nearly 60% since 2012.



**Notes:** The 3.6 million acres of farmland protected at the state level – about 46% of the U.S. total – is equivalent to 5,672 square miles, about the size of Connecticut.

**Source:** [American Farmland Trust](#)

Graphic: Alexandra Byrne and Jiachuan Wu / NBC News

Some advocates say easements remain an important tool to protect small farms and help younger farmers gain a foothold, even if those growers are among the least efficient producers in the industry.

“We need to have a diversity of farm production types and value small-to-midsize operations that produce food for their communities,” said Krisztián Varsa, who oversees easement purchases at the Conservation Fund, a national environmental group. He worries about large farms bundling up preserved land to get bigger on the cheap, while smaller ones with less capital and trickier business models struggle.





— The 253-acre Short property was sold for \$1.4 million in 2023 to the port authority, which says the land may not turn a profit for another two years. Chona Kasinger for NBC News

Land trusts say they’ve done their best to anticipate younger farmers’ needs. The 2014 federal farm bill [provided the first opportunity for subdivision](#), within limits, but only after millions of preserved acres had already prohibited that. Many farmers are still crafting easements that preclude subdivision, said Carrie Lindig, the easement program division director for the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“I still hear about a number of folks who don’t want it,” she said.

**A lot of thought has to be put into the way these things are structured for the transfer of the land to another generation.**

BEN SHIELDS, OWNER OF IN GOOD HEART FARM, PITTSBORO, N.C.

Other farmers struggle with size restrictions when they do want to expand.

Ben Shields, 45, owns In Good Heart Farm in Pittsboro, North Carolina, where an easement prevents him from growing crops on the roughly 15 acres that are forested. A friend let him use a workable parcel down the road, and this year Shields partnered with another local farmer to grow a wider range of fruits and vegetables.

He said the easement was part of the property's appeal, and he's grateful to the previous owner for making the farm affordable. She'd originally asked \$365,000 but wound up selling to him for about \$190,000 in 2016. But the size limitations have frustrated Shields continuously.

"A lot of thought has to be put into the way these things are structured for the transfer of the land to another generation," he said.



— The port authority says its main goal as landlord of the Short farm is to feed the regional community.

Chona Kasinger for NBC News

Nevertheless, land trusts say they're inundated with requests for preserved farmland. Jess Laggis, who leads conservation at the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, a land trust in Asheville, North Carolina,

said her queue is five years long. Most of the farmers she works with are older, and some have died before the preservation process finishes.

“We try to be as liberal as possible in imagining what the future of agriculture looks like, because we acknowledge we don’t know,” Laggis said.

In Washington state, Short said it’s been a tough few months since leaving his farm. He moved into a new house and feels good about his retirement funds, but he misses the land. Whenever they can, he and Sandy visit the three younger farmers working on it now.

“I can talk with them and guide them, see how they’re doing,” he said.

One of them is Martin Frederickson, 46, who raises cattle on an adjacent farm. He now leases 75 acres of the Short property to give his animals more space to roam. Frederickson said he wanted a long-term arrangement that allowed him to nurture the land and feels the port authority’s ownership provides that. But buying the whole place was never financially viable.

A lot of farmland “is valued above its productive capacity, even with a conservation easement,” Frederickson said.

Crystie Kisler, 54, who grows organic grains that can withstand [a rapidly warming climate](#) on her own 150-acre farm nearby, leases 17 acres from the port. She agreed easements can be helpful for small farmers but said, “It’s not like a magic bean that you plant, and then everything’s OK.”

The port authority is comfortable remaining a landlord, even though the farm isn’t profitable and might not be for another two years, Berg said. He’s still content with the acquisition, which he said pre-empted deep-pocketed buyers who “could satisfy the requirements of the easement by owning it and keeping it farmable by just having a couple of horses run around.”

There are no plans to sell.

“We’re not hoping to send soybeans around the country,” Berg said. “We’re hoping to feed ourselves, and maybe some folks around the region.”

Alexandra Byrne

Alexandra Byrne is an intern with the NBC News Business and Economy Unit.